

NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5679
BILL READ/BOSTON

MARCH 31, 1978

THE NEW ISSUE, AGAIN

ANNCR:

AMONG THE ISSUES IN RELATIONS BETWEEN RICH AND POOR COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD IS THE FLOW OF NEWS, OR MORE PRECISELY WESTERN CONTROL OF NEWS FLOW. THAT ISSUE, WHICH IS TO BE TAKEN UP AT A CONFERENCE IN CAIRO (APRIL 2-5). IS DISCUSSED IN THIS BACKGROUND REPORT BY VOA'S BILL READ.

VOICE:

FOR SOME TIME NOW THE UNITED STATES AND OTHER INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACIES HAVE ENGAGED IN A DIALOGUE WITH THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES OVER A SENSITIVE TOPIC -- NEWS. DIALOGUE, IN FACT MAY BE TOO KIND A WORD, SINCE RHETORIC, NOT REASON, HAS CHARACTERIZED MUCH OF THE DISCUSSION. PASSIONATE PHRASES LIKE "CULTURAL IMPERIALISM" AND EQUALLY EMOTIONAL DEFENSES OF PRESS FREEDOM HAVE MARKED DEBATES ABOUT THE FLOW OF NEWS FROM ONE COUNTRY TO ANOTHER. THE RESULT IS THAT WESTERN DOMINATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF NEWS HAS EMERGED AS AN IMPORTANT ISSUE IN THE SO-CALLED NORTH-SOUTH DIALOGUE.

THE ISSUE ITSELF IS A COMPLICATED ONE. ON THE ONE HAND WHAT IS AT STAKE IS PRESS CENSORSHIP VERSUS PRESS FREEDOM, WHILE ON THE OTHER HAND THERE IS AN ALLEGED CONFLICT BETWEEN CULTURAL IMPERIALISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY. THESE ARE THE MOST TALKED ABOUT, BUT NOT THE ONLY MATTERS THAT HAVE GIVEN RISE TO SOME FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS. HOW ARE THE PEOPLES OF THE WORLD TO COMMUNICATE WITH EACH OTHER? ON WHAT TERMS IS COMMUNICATION TO TAKE PLACE? AND WHAT EVENTS ARE LEGITIMATE MATTERS FOR COMMUNICATION?

WHILE THE QUESTIONS ARE FAIRLY STRAIGHTFORWARD, THERE IS HARDLY ANYTHING LIKE AN INTERNATIONAL CONSENSUS ON ANSWERS. THUS WESTERN NEWS AGENCIES ARE MORE LIKELY TO REPORT COUPS AND CATASTROPHIES FROM THE THIRD WORLD THAN AGRICULTURAL OR EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS. AGAINST THIS BACKGROUND SOME 80 INDIVIDUALS FROM 30 COUNTRIES ARE GATHERING IN CAIRO FOR A CONFERENCE TO ASSESS THE PROSPECTS FOR COOPERATION IN COMMUNICATIONS. IN ORGANIZING THE CONFERENCE, PHILIP HORTON -- DIRECTOR OF THE MURROW CENTER OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY NEAR BOSTON -- HAS SOUGHT TO MOVE THE DEBATE ABOUT NEWS BEYOND THE STAGE OF CONFRONTATION. REASONABLE MEN OFTEN DISAGREE, SAYS HORTON. BUT HE ALSO BELIEVES THAT JOURNALISTS OUGHT TO BE ABLE TO SIT DOWN AND DISCUSS THEIR PROBLEMS IN A PROFESSIONAL MANNER.

IT APPEARS THAT MANY JOURNALISTS FROM BOTH RICH AND POOR COUNTRIES AGREE WITH MR. HORTON...OR AT LEAST THEY CONSIDER HIS IDEA WORTH TRYING. DISTINGUISHED JOURNALISTS FROM AFRICA, ASIA, LATIN AMERICA, WESTERN EUROPE AND THE UNITED STATES WILL PARTICIPATE IN THE CAIRO CONFERENCE. JOINING THEM ARE A NUMBER OF COMMUNICATIONS SCHOLARS, AND LOOKING ON ARE A GROUP OF INTERESTED PUBLIC SERVANTS. AMONG THEM IS PRESIDENT CARTER'S MEDIA ADVISER, BARRY JAGODA.

FOR THREE DAYS THERE WILL BE MUCH DISCUSSION IN CAIRO ABOUT NEWS COVERAGE OF POOR COUNTRIES...ABOUT THE IMPACT OF POLITICS, MONEY, AND TECHNOLOGY ON THE FLOW OF NEWS...ABOUT THE TRAINING OF THIRD WORLD JOURNALISTS AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TO MEDIA IN POOR COUNTRIES...AND ABOUT MUCH MORE. IN THE END, HOWEVER, WHAT MAY WELL BE THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECT OF THIS CONFERENCE IS WHETHER THERE IS MORE REASON AND LESS RHETORIC WHEN REPRESENTATIVES OF RICH AND POOR COUNTRIES TALK ABOUT NEWS.

JS/RCS